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SUBJECT: AKWA IBOM DEPUTY GOVERNOR IMPEACHED, REINSTATED, RESIGNED, REPLACED

Classified By: Acting Consul General William M. Howe for Reasons 1.4 (B & D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The recent impeachment and subsequent save-face "resignation" of Akwa Ibom State Deputy Governor, Chris Ekpenyong, highlighted ever-present rivalries and rifts within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). The Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly impeached the Deputy Governor for "gross misconduct and corruption." The PDP national leadership criticized the impeachment and ordered an investigation. The House agreed to reverse its sanction but insisted the Deputy Governor resign. Michael Udofi has been appointed in Ekpenyong's stead. Akwa Ibom state governor, Victor Attah, is an Atiku partisan, and the move to oust Ekpenyong, an Obasanjo loyalist and likely gubernatorial candidate, is part of the internal PDP power-jockeying as candidates and constituencies begin to realign for the 2007 elections. End Summary.

12. (U) On June 23, the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly impeached the state deputy governor, Chris Ekpenyong on three major charges. They alleged that Ekpenyong used government funds to purchase a house in Houston and failed to disclose this as required by law. The Deputy Governor does not deny family ownership of the house but maintains he did not/not use government funds for its purchase. Critics question how the deputy afforded the house, which is rumored to be worth more than \$3 million, and why he purchased it in the name of his 12-year-old son. Ekpenyong was also accused of physically assaulting a woman who annoyed him with her requests for money. Finally, the House accused Ekpenyong of using his position as Chairman of the Finance and General Purposes Committee to obtain unfair advantage in government contract bids submitted by his own company.

13. (U) Ekpenyong refused to appear before an investigating panel set up by the House. He filed a suit in court challenging the impeachment and accused Governor Victor Attah of initiating the impeachment process to frustrate his bid to become the next governor. Ekpenyong alleged the governor bribed the legislators to impeach him. Idongesit Uduokpo, a former state commissioner and close associate of Ekpenyong, also linked the impeachment to the succession battle in 2007. He told journalists that Governor Attah masterminded the impeachment to weaken opposition and pave the way for his son-in-law to succeed him in 2007.

14. (SBU) Dr. Ebebe Ukpang, a senior advisor to Governor Attah, however, denied that Ekpenyong's impeachment was politically motivated. He told PolSpec that Ekpenyong was impeached because of the serious allegations leveled against him by the House of Assembly. He said no responsible legislature could ignore such gross abuse of office by a high-ranking government official.

15. (U) The PDP's National Executive Council condemned the impeachment process for failing to follow due process. Since both the executive and legislative branches of Akwa Ibom state government are controlled by the PDP, the party reserved the right to ensure that its members are subject to fair hearings and due process. The PDP then set up a committee to investigate the impeachment and make recommendations.

16. (U) Striking a compromise with the PDP national leadership on July 5, the House of Assembly re-instated Ekpenyong as deputy governor with the understanding he would resign from office. Michael Udofia, a prominent PDP chieftain, has since been appointed the new deputy governor.

17. (C) COMMENT: The intervention of the largely pro-Obasanjo PDP national executive in the Akwa Ibom incident is widely seen as designed to give Ekpenyong, an Obasanjo loyalist, a graceful exit. Attah, a well-known associate of Vice President Atiku Abubakar, is said to have been attempting to punish Ekpenyong for disloyalty.

18. (C) Intraparty disputes are more the rule than the exception in Nigeria. For example, another dispute currently rages within the All Progressive Grand Alliance party (APGA), whose main constituency lies in the divisive Southern regional zones. Chief Chekwes Okorie and Chief Mike Umeh

both claim rights to the chairmanship of the party. A powerful PDP governor from the Niger Delta region told us some months ago that the battle for the Presidency will be fought not on election day but inside the party caucuses. He (perhaps somewhat overoptimistically) likened the PDP to South Africa's ANC, saying it is given that PDP will score victory in 2007, the only questions are who will be the party's standard bearers. As the electoral season heats up, we can expect more of these "family squabbles." END COMMENT.  
HOWE